

## **Frame Tales and Oral Tradition**

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Frame tales, medieval literary works in which characters become narrators by telling stories of their own, owe a great debt to oral tradition and transmission. Oral tradition provides much of the raw material for these texts, while at the same time providing medieval audiences and modern readers cues for understanding them. Frame tales depict oral storytelling events in such a way as to give modern scholars some hint of how they might have taken place. *The Thousand Nights and a Night* portrays an intimate storytelling event between husband and wife; the *Decameron* shows how people use stories to entertain and to forget life's tragedies, and the *Canterbury Tales* depicts how people tell stories to pass the time. Thus influence flows both ways, in and out of the frame, from and toward an understanding of medieval orality in Europe and western Asia.

In this context, oral narrative tradition means the process by which stories are composed and performed for an audience. In a frame tale, the writer creates an audience in the text, providing a bridge between actual oral storytelling traditions and a literate genre that aims to depict those traditions. Moreover, framing structures also underlie manuscript versions of epics and ballads, leading one to believe that composers of frame tales borrowed more than just the concept of storytelling traditions from the oral performance culture. Many of the stories these fictional characters choose to tell are traditional stories, appearing in many different cultures and contexts. Medieval oral performers themselves may have constructed frames to unify their performances. The stories, structures, and performance contexts in frame tales all emanate from medieval orality.

Because frame tales in their manuscript form are clearly the work of literate traditions as well, the achievement of oral tradition scholars most important to their study was the dismantling of the chimera of the "great divide" between orality and literacy. The idea of a free flow of influence between voice and text, performance and presentation, establishes a basis from which a modern audience can read and interpret frame tales. The energy created by the interchange among oralities and literacies may also

explain in part why frame tales were particularly popular in the medieval period and began to fade not long afterward. Frame tales thrived in this particular verbal environment, but later ceded their position to the novel as verbal artistry became more and more literary. Oral tradition studies enable scholars to escape the endless search for intertextual routes for the transmission of medieval tales and concentrate more on what those tales might mean. By focusing on performance and culture, we may approach frame tales and the tales interpolated within them in such a way as to understand what they might have meant to medieval audiences. Manuscripts provide us with the traces of the past; oral tradition studies bring those traces to life.

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